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ABSTRACT

Guidance directors' attitudes, perceptions, and guidance practices concerning vocational education in comprehensive secondary schools in Illinois were investigated. The study also investigated the relationships among these and selected school/personnel demographic variables. The research design was descriptive. A total of 222 participants (from a sample of 253) completed a 5-part questionnaire. Data were analyzed using frequency distributions, percentages, means, standard deviations, analysis of variance, t-tests, correlational analysis, and multiple regression analysis. Nine conclusions were reached: (1) guidance directors have positive attitudes toward vocational education; (2) they have divided perceptions of vocational education; (3) departmental guidance practices are positive; (4) graduation requirements and parents' reluctance for their children to take vocational coursework have contributed to enrollment difficulties; (5) graduation requirements and scheduling conflicts with academic courses have a negative impact on vocational programs; (6) enrollment of their own children in a vocational program has a positive influence on guidance directors' attitudes; (7) experience in teaching vocational courses has a positive impact on directors' attitudes; (8) specific vocational requirements are more positive than when courses are chosen from a group; and (9) the more positive the director's attitude toward vocational education, the more positive the department. (13 references) (NLA)

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# ATTITUDES, PERCEPTIONS, AND GUIDANCE PRACTICES OF ILLINOIS GUIDANCE DIRECTORS CONCERNING VOCATIONAL EDUCATION IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS

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# ATTITUDES, PERCEPTIONS, AND GUIDANCE PRACTICES OF ILLINOIS GUIDANCE DIRECTORS CONCERNING VOCATIONAL EDUCATION IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS

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## INTRODUCTION

Educational reform reports such as A Nation at Risk have precipitated a deluge of support for increased graduation requirements, thereby restricting time for students to take vocational education (Frantz, Jr., Strickland, and Elson, 1987). In fact, a decrease in vocational education enrollments has been one of the most observable aftermaths of increased high school graduation requirements (Dyrenfurth, 1985). Availability and scheduling of vocational education courses also have been adversely affected by increasing graduation requirements, resulting in depressed enrollments. Frantz, Jr. et al. (1987) reported that many states have decreased their vocational course offerings. Also, vocational instruction has been relegated to shorter blocks of time (Fielden, 1987). As a result, limited access to vocational courses has been a major concern for college-bound students who may be interested in these offerings, as well as those who are interested in occupations requiring less than a baccalaureate degree (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1981).

Guidance counselors have had, and will continue to have, a vital role in providing the affective and operational support needed by vocational education programs. Internal marketing is essential, to assure that guidance counselors believe in the value of these programs and communicate this value to students (O'Conner and Trussel, 1987). Although some studies have identified attitudes of guidance counselors toward vocational education (Ricadela, 1981; Spillman, 1983), there has been a lack of research concerning perceptions of vocational education as related to increased graduation requirements and other factors which affect program accessibility. Furthermore, in view of shrinking vocational education enrollments, research has not adequately attended to guidance directors' guidance practices concerning vocational education. Therefore, the problem of this study was that vocational education is currently experiencing limited accessibility and declining enrollments, necessitating closer examination of the program support provided by guidance counselors.

## PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES

The primary purpose of this study was to determine guidance directors' attitudes, perceptions, and guidance practices concerning vocational education in comprehensive secondary schools in Illinois. A secondary purpose was to investigate the relationships among these variables and selected school/personal demographic variables. More specifically, this study addressed the following research questions:

1. What were the attitudes of guidance directors in Illinois toward vocational education in comprehensive secondary schools?

2. What were the perceptions of guidance directors in Illinois concerning vocational education in their schools?

3. What were the perceptions of guidance directors in Illinois concerning the quality of vocational education programs offered in their schools in each of the major service areas?

4. What guidance practices concerning vocational education were guidance departments in Illinois comprehensive secondary schools currently following, as perceived by guidance directors?

5. To what extent did guidance directors differ in their attitudes, perceptions, and guidance practices concerning vocational education, based on selected demographic variables?

6. What was the relationship between guidance directors' departmental guidance practices concerning vocational education and their (a) attitudes toward vocational education and (b) perceptions of vocational education in their schools?

7. What variables were the best predictors of departmental guidance practices concerning vocational education in Illinois comprehensive secondary schools?

## RELATED LITERATURE

Affective support by the school community, as expressed by attitudes toward vocational education and the perceived need for vocational education, has been deemed essential in maintaining quality, accessible programs (Speight, 1984/1985). Operational support by the school community also has been vital to program success. Course scheduling has been targeted as one such form of support which can allow accessibility to both academic and vocational courses (Lotto & Murphy, 1987). Curricular advisement by "significant others" such as guidance counselors has been of particular importance in assuring that vocational programs are serving those who will benefit most from their offerings (Hartman, 1986).

The related literature indicated that guidance counselors tend to have favorable attitudes toward vocational education (Ricadela, 1981; Spillman, 1983). However, the cumulative studies did not examine attitudes and guidance practices concerning vocational education in relation to current curriculum reform issues.

## PROCEDURES

The research design utilized in this study was descriptive in nature. The target and accessible populations were all guidance directors in comprehensive public secondary schools in Illinois. The sample size of 253 was determined according to a formula developed by Cochran (1977). Proportionate stratified random sampling was used to determine the actual sample, with size of high school enrollment as the stratifying variable.

The questionnaire was a five-part instrument developed by the researcher. The researcher's graduate committee members and two faculty members in the Department of Educational Psychology and Guidance at Eastern Illinois University determined that the instrument possessed content validity.

A pilot test involving 22 randomly selected Illinois guidance directors was conducted to determine the reliability of the instrument. Since Likert scales were used for most of the items, with no distinction of correct or incorrect answers, Cronbach's coefficient alpha procedure was used to calculate the reliability estimates (Borg & Gall, 1983). Reliabilities determined from the pilot and sample data were consistent with guidelines established by Nunnally (1967). Therefore, Parts I through IV reflecting guidance directors' (a) attitudes toward vocational

education, (b) perceptions of vocational education in their schools, (c) perceptions of the quality of vocational education programs in their schools in each of the major service areas, and (d) guidance practices concerning vocational education were treated as constructs in the statistical analyses.

Questionnaires were mailed to subjects on April 23, 1988; reminder postcards, on May 4th; and follow-up questionnaires, on May 14th. A random sample of nine (30%) of the non-respondents was telephoned on May 30th and June 1st to obtain their responses to the instrument.

## ANALYSIS OF DATA

The data were analyzed according to the mainframe version of SAS. The information provided by the respondents concerning attitudes, perceptions, guidance practices, and demographic data were analyzed separately using frequency distributions, percentages, means, and standard deviations.

Analysis of variance, as calculated by the General Linear Model in SAS (PROC GLM), was used to determine whether there were significant differences among group means concerning attitudes, perceptions, and guidance practices, based on selected categorical demographic variables with three or more levels. A significance level of .05 was used in these statistical tests. The Tukey-Kramer method of multiple comparisons was used to ascertain whether significant differences existed among all possible pairwise comparisons. T-tests were utilized to determine whether there were significant differences in the dependent variable based on dichotomous demographic variables.

Correlational analyses were conducted to determine the relationships among attitudes, perceptions, guidance practices, and selected demographic variables. The Pearson correlation coefficient was used to draw relationships between the interval variables. The Spearman correlation coefficient was used to draw relationships between ordinal and interval variables.

Multiple regression analysis was used to determine the percentage of the variance in the dependent variable, guidance practices, that could be explained by a linear combination of the independent variables. The RSQUARE procedure was used to identify the combinations of predictor variables which explained the greatest amount of the total variance in guidance practices. Stepwise multiple regression, specifically the STEPWISE option of the STEPWISE procedure, was used to show the increment of unique variance added to the set of predictor variables by each successive predictor variable.

## RESULTS

An instrument return rate of 88.5% was realized in this study. Of the 224 questionnaires returned, 222 were deemed usable and served as the basis for the findings. Since t-tests revealed no significant differences between the respondents and non-respondents on any items, the results obtained from the respondents were generalized to the sample and the target population.

Attitudes Toward Vocational Education in High Schools. Almost 93% of the respondents agreed that a comprehensive high school education should include some study in vocational education, while 88% agreed that vocational education courses are valuable for all students, regardless of their academic ability. Approximately one half (49%) of the responding guidance directors felt that vocational education coursework should be included in high school graduation requirements.

Although 70% of the respondents agreed that college-bound students should take vocational education, only 44% agreed that these courses provide college-bound

students with competencies they will need to succeed in college. The mean for the construct "attitudes toward vocational education" was 3.63 on the 5-point scale (1 = STRONGLY DISAGREE, 5 = STRONGLY AGREE).

Perceptions of Vocational Education in Guidance Directors' Schools. Almost 90% of the responding guidance directors agreed that their vocational teachers are as effective in their teaching as academic teachers are. Eighty-four percent of the respondents agreed that students enrolled in vocational education are satisfied with these courses. However, only one half of the respondents felt that their school's vocational teachers are doing an adequate job of publicizing the benefits of their programs. Furthermore, almost 65% of the respondents felt that vocational and academic teachers do not collaborate to integrate academic subjects into vocational education courses in their high schools.

According to almost 60% of the respondents, parents of college-bound students are reluctant to have their children enroll in vocational education courses. Students have very little time to enroll in vocational education because of increased graduation requirements, as perceived by almost 75% of the responding guidance directors. The mean for the construct "perceptions of vocational education" was 3.30 on the 5-point scale (1 = SD, 5 = SA).

Perceptions of Vocational Education Program Quality by Major Service Area. With respect to agricultural education, responding guidance directors regarded the competency and preparation of teachers (4.01) and the quality of instruction (3.86) as "high" (1 = VERY LOW, 5 = VERY HIGH). According to respondents, agricultural education is of considerably more value to students who plan to work upon graduation (3.60) than to those who plan to attend college (3.03). The mean for the construct "overall program quality," consisting of all the items in a major service area, was considerably higher for business education (3.98) compared to agricultural education (3.49), home economics (3.44), and industrial education (3.41).

Guidance Practices Concerning Vocational Education in High Schools. Almost 99% of the respondents agreed that "if a noncollege-bound student expresses interest in a vocational course" or "if a student's career interest is related to a vocational offering in my high school," their guidance department tends to advise him/her to consider enrolling that course. Approximately 83% of the respondents indicated that, if a college-bound student expresses interest in a vocational course, their guidance department tends to advise him/her to consider enrolling in that course.

Ninety percent of the respondents agreed that increased graduation requirements do not affect their guidance department's tendency to advise noncollege-bound students to consider enrolling in vocational education courses, whereas only 58% agreed with this situation when college-bound students were involved. Similarly, 65% of the respondents indicated that, when scheduling conflicts with academic courses occur, their guidance department tends to advise noncollege-bound students to consider enrolling in vocational education courses. However, 60% of the respondents disclosed that their guidance departments do not tend to advise college-bound students to do so when scheduling conflicts occur. The mean for the construct "guidance practices concerning vocational education" was 3.74 on the 5-point scale (1 = SD, 5 = SA).

Differences in Attitudes, Perceptions, and Guidance Practices Based on Demographic Variables. Guidance directors with sons or daughters who have taken high school vocational education courses had (a) more positive attitudes toward vocational education and (b) more positive perceptions of vocational programs in their schools than did guidance directors without children enrolled in these courses

($p < .05$). Respondents who taught vocational education courses had more positive attitudes toward vocational education than did guidance directors who taught non-vocational courses ($p < .05$). Guidance practices regarding vocational education in schools requiring one or more vocational courses for graduation were significantly more positive than in schools in which these courses may be chosen from a group required for graduation (e.g., one course in vocational education or fine arts required) ($p < .05$).

Relationships Concerning Departmental Guidance Practices. Significant, positive relationships were observed between guidance directors' attitudes toward vocational education and departmental guidance practices ($r=.60$) and between their perceptions of vocational education in their schools and departmental guidance practices ($r = .42$).

Regression of Departmental Guidance Practices on Selected Independent Variables. A regression model with an $R^2$ value of .408 was obtained and included the following variables: attitudes toward vocational education, years as a guidance counselor, age of guidance director, and size of school. Guidance directors' attitudes toward vocational education (.373) accounted for almost all of the explained variance in departmental guidance practices (.408).

## CONCLUSIONS

1. Guidance directors have generally positive attitudes toward vocational education in public high schools. Departmental guidance practices are substantially influenced by guidance directors' attitudes toward vocational education and their perceptions of program quality.

2. Guidance directors have generally divided perceptions of vocational education in their schools. While they feel instructional integrity and teacher competency are high in vocational education, they question the specific benefit of these programs to students, particularly those who are college-bound.

3. Departmental guidance practices in high schools are generally positive concerning vocational education, as perceived by guidance directors.

4. Guidance directors perceive that increased high school graduation requirements and parents' reluctance for their college-bound children to take vocational education have contributed to enrollment difficulties in these courses.

5. Increased graduation requirements and scheduling conflicts with academic courses have a considerably greater negative impact on guidance practices concerning vocational education when the focus is on college-bound students, as opposed to noncollege-bound students.

6. Enrollment of a son or daughter in vocational education courses has a positive influence on guidance directors' attitudes toward vocational education and perceptions of these programs in their schools of employment.

7. Experience in teaching vocational education courses has a positive impact on guidance directors' attitudes toward vocational education.

8. Guidance practices regarding vocational education in schools specifically requiring vocational education coursework for graduation are more positive than

in schools in which these courses may be chosen from a group required for graduation.

9. The more positive a guidance director's attitude toward vocational education and perception of vocational education in his/her school are, the more positive the departmental guidance practices concerning vocational education tend to be.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PROVIDING VOCATIONAL EDUCATION IN HIGH SCHOOLS

1. Vocational educators should increase communication with guidance counselors, parents, students, and school administrators to convey the importance of their updated, redirected programs.

2. Teachers in each major service area should pursue greater individualized interaction with guidance counselors regarding the nature of their vocational programs and course scheduling. In this study, guidance directors exposed to vocational education through their teaching or their children's involvement viewed vocational education more positively. This finding implies that guidance directors' familiarization with vocational education through other modes, particularly on a personal level, may have a positive influence on their attitudes toward this curriculum.

3. Vocational education leaders in Illinois should consider broadening the state's vocational education concepts of career preparation and occupational development in order to attract both college-bound and noncollege-bound students and to address curricular reform issues. Similarly, state leaders should consider modifying the state funding guidelines for vocational education as these occupational development concepts expand and as more non-traditional vocational education courses are offered.

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